

A fair, just world doesn't exist by AnnaStormRogers

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Summary:

Immediately after the events of season 2, Steve Harrington deals with a concussion, unwanted emotions and the fact that he has a family that actually cares.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I do love Steve Harrington. I've never had the feels for a fictional character like I've had for Steve. So after binge watching both seasons, I had to write a fic that was Steve-centric. Anyway, thank you for opening this story and I hope you enjoy it!

Steve Harrington, formerly King Steve, former Casanova and popular jock, stood in the corner of the Byers living room. It was chaotic in the house after El, or Jane, as was her new name, had closed the gate to the Upside Down. Presently, the house was overflowing with two adults, three teenagers and six kids. Everyone was drained, both physically and mentally, after the ordeal with the Demodogs and the Mind Flayer. He remembered with a pang the other adult who, in a fair, just world, would be here as well.

Bob Newby, aka Bob the Brain, the man who had helped save Hopper, the man who had not hesitated to get involved in the craziness that was the supernatural world, who had volunteered for what was essentially a suicide mission, all because he cared too little for his own life in comparison to those he loved. The Byers and Mike were devastated and although Steve had never met the man, he felt the Byers' grief and the loss of a man who was clearly a good, wonderful human being. Mike had told him and the other children how Bob had saved their lives and lost his in the process and Steve wished with all his soul that the kid hadn't had to watch that.

He wished for so many things right now, that Bob hadn't died an awful death, that the Upside Down never existed, that a little boy hadn't had to go through absolute hell, that all these kids didn't have to deal with nightmares like this at such a young age, that Barb hadn't died the way she had in his own yard, that Nancy didn't just think he was bullshit. But he couldn't do anything. He hated being reminded of how helpless human beings were in the grand scheme of things.

He had taken it to an all new level though. He had one job. One.

Keep the kids safe. He failed on all counts. What would've happened if Max hadn't stepped in? Lucas would've been next. And knowing Billy, he wouldn't have stopped even after that. Steve had tried to protect Max and the others from her violent brother only to wind up being saved himself.

He couldn't even stop the kids from entering the tunnels after that and when he said he'd keep them safe in there, he truly believed that he could. But he didn't do that either. He didn't get Dustin up that rope fast enough. What was he good for really? He was barely passing his classes, he couldn't write college essays, he couldn't please his parents, hell, he couldn't even keep his girlfriend. And now, he'd messed up the most important thing he had been tasked with. Keeping the kids safe. He had promised Hopper and Joyce that he'd do it. He had promised Jonathan. He had promised Nancy that he would keep her brother safe. And now, he had broken that promise. Useless. He was useless. For all his talk, he couldn't take on Billy Hargrove. All he'd done was get his face pounded in before passing out in the living room. He was such a screw up.

Useless.

Weak.

A mistake.

Wasn't that what his father had told him he was since he was five years old? If his father had only put those thoughts in his head, the last two years had all but cemented it in his mind. He'd lost to his father first, then to Jonathan and now to Billy. The only beating he had actually deserved was the one from Jonathan and Steve harboured no ill will towards the other boy. But it left him feeling inadequate and weak.

Speaking of beatings, the one he had received from Billy that night was quite painful to say the least. Even now, as he stood slumped against the wall, he could feel his legs shaking with the strain of simply holding him up, his head hurt like crazy, his vision was blurred and shaky and he was amazed he could even put together a coherent thought. It was amazing what adrenaline and desperation could drive you to do. But now the high from the tunnels was

wearing off and he was finally feeling the effects of the fight.

He looked around, taking in his surroundings, Ms. Byers was sitting on the couch, fussing over her youngest son. Will seemed okay, other than being extremely tired and pale. Hopper and El were off to the side, having what looked like a very serious conversation. The other kids were sitting on the floor, their attention divided between their own conversation and Will. Nancy and Jonathan were on the other side of the room and Steve's heart gave an involuntary pang when the other boy embraced Nancy. He looked away quickly, unable to watch any longer. His mind told him it was for the best, that it wasn't meant to be, but his heart was shattering all over again and it hurt. It hurt so bad. But he didn't blame them, not at all, he blamed himself. After all, by his own admission, he was a shitty boyfriend.

Deciding that he'd done enough damage, he decided to quietly go back to his house. House... not home... never home because that place could never be warm enough to be considered a home. Empty as the place was and as much as he hated being alone, he knew Hopper and Joyce had enough on their plates without him adding to it with his injuries. He could take care of himself. He wasn't that important anyway.

He slowly backed out of the room, ignoring the stab of pain in his head. Quietly opening the front door, he let himself out and walked unsteadily towards his car, haphazardly parked in the front yard. He opened the door and was about to get in when a wave of dizziness hit him hard, almost sending him reeling. He clung to the door and closed his eyes, breathing deeply to ward off the dizziness and nausea that accompanied it.

Opening his eyes, he was only mildly surprised to find himself kneeling on the ground, his arms shaking as they kept him from faceplanting into the grass. If his mind had been working clearly enough, he would have been horrified at the fact that he couldn't remember how he found himself kneeling when he started off standing. As it was, his muddled mind only helpfully supplied that maybe it wasn't the best plan to drive back home. Standing up with some difficulty, he closed the car door and pocketed his keys. He started the long walk home, a lone figure, taking slow, unsteady steps along the dark road. Finally feeling the full effects of the concussion,

confused, dazed and in no small amount of pain, he didn't even realise that he had veered off course and into the woods.

Back in the Byers home, chaos ruled as everyone frantically looked for an absent teenager.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow! I'm honestly stunned by how well this story has been received! None of my stories so far have received such an enthusiastic response! Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to read this story and comment, leave kudos and bookmark. You made my day! Thank you so much! I hope this chapter is up to your expectations.

This chapter focuses on everyone back at the Byers' house. Steve will be back in the next chapter. I did try to keep everyone in character. I'm not sure quite how successful that endeavour was, but I tried. Feel free to let me know if you think a character is OOC. Thank you all for reading and I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Joyce sat on the couch, holding her youngest child who seemed quite content to let her fuss over him for a short time. She knew that soon he'd be weary of her smothering but she also knew that he needed it right now. She took a deep breath, trying to rid her mind of Bob's grisly, undeserved death. It wouldn't do anyone any good if she got upset now.

Joyce was tired of being upset all the time. What had she and her boys done to deserve such a life? Her boys were just children. Speaking of children, her heart broke for all the other kids who had also been suckered into this supernatural mess, whether it had been through the people they knew or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The oldest of them was only 17, legally and in her and Hopper's eyes, still a child. It didn't matter how responsible they were or how much they acted like adults sometimes, they were still far too young to be embroiled in something as horrifying as this.

It wasn't fair, a world where children suffered and were traumatised while adults remained oblivious. Why did they live in a world where it was now impossible to preserve the purity of children and protect

them? She, herself had lived such a carefree life at that age. What she wouldn't give to make it so that these nine children had had that privilege as well and she knew Jim felt the same. At least Jonathan, Will and Jane had their parents or guardians. While it didn't make dealing with the trauma any easier, they had someone to talk to. The other six had no one. It was her hope that the others would feel welcome enough to come to her or Hopper, even if it was just to talk. She felt bonded to these kids, protective, even if they weren't all hers and even though she had hardly spoken to some of them. They had all gotten involved even though they could've just run away and no one would've blamed them in the slightest. The fact that they had stayed awed her and created an affection in her for them all. She was incredibly grateful for their contribution in saving her son.

Her eyes swept around the room, quickly checking on each of the kids, noting with relief that none of them had any injuries more serious than small cuts and bruises. She felt a spike of fear however, when she realised that there were only eight kids and Hopper was missing as well. The Harrington boy. She remembered from the previous year when Jonathan told her how the boy had saved his and Nancy's lives, coming back when he had initially run and fighting that monstrosity when he had no clue of what was going on. She had never really gotten the opportunity to thank him for that and she felt immensely guilty about it.

She noticed that the boy's face was quite banged up before and had meant to take care of that but now, it seemed that he had vanished. She was confused. He was there not five minutes before, observing the occupants of the room with a look not dissimilar to her own. He had looked sad, worried and like he was hurting and not just physically. She had every mind to go to him but it looked like she had missed him while distracted. She looked around, hoping he had just moved to another part of the room but he wasn't there and that scared her more than she liked.

"What's wrong, Ms. Byers?", Mike asked, looking worried.

"Did any of you see where Steve and Jim went? They're still here right?"

This prompted all the kids to look around and a mild panic swept

across the room when neither of the concerned persons were spotted.

“They were here! They were just here!”, Lucas said, standing up.

“Ms. Byers, Steve’s hurt too.”, Dustin said, now looking scared.

Joyce smiled reassuringly at him, knowing that Dustin had taken a liking to the older boy, looking up to him already.

“We’ll find him honey, don’t worry.”

At that moment, Hopper entered through the front door, looking a bit more frantic than usual. Ignoring her relief at seeing that Hopper at least was alright, she immediately asked, “Did you see Steve?” at the same moment that Hopper asked, “Where’s the Harrington kid?”

There was a momentary silence now as everyone completely absorbed the fact that Steve was indeed missing before the room erupted, everyone getting up quickly and talking over one another in panic. All members of the group were clearly on edge after all that had happened and a missing member only served to create a distressed pandemonium.

“Hey, hey, hey! Everyone just calm down for a second!”, Hopper tried.

Everyone quietened down quickly before Hopper asked, “Okay, I looked for him outside. He isn’t there, but the BMW parked outside, is that Steve’s car?”

“Yes!”, came the almost shouted response from Jonathan, Nancy and Dustin.

“Alright, alright. So the kid didn’t take his car. Why didn’t he?”

“He was hurt pretty bad. It was my brother.”, Max said quietly.

“Maybe he didn’t want to risk driving?”, Nancy suggested uncertainly.

“If he left, he’d be on foot then. But why would he leave so late and if he was hurt? It doesn’t make any sense.”, Jonathan said.

“Kid probably wasn’t thinking clearly if he got hit on the head.”

“He was fine before!”, Mike protested frantically.

“Adrenaline is an amazing thing kiddo. I’m gonna go look for him. You guys just stay here in case he comes back.”

Joyce started to protest before looking down at Will. She was torn. She didn’t want to leave Will alone but there was another child out there, injured and alone and Hopper was the only other adult there. Sure, Hawkins was a small town but she doubted Jim could find the boy all by himself and bring him back. But her baby needed her too. She was startled when her son shifted to look up at her.

“Mom, you need to go with him.”

“I... I can’t leave you now.”

“You can’t leave him either. He’s hurt. And I won’t be alone. The others are here. I’ll be fine.”

Still unsure, Joyce looked at her brave boy, hesitating.

“Mom, I’ll look after him. Don’t worry. You should go with Hopper. Maybe you’ll find him sooner.”, Jonathan said, suddenly appearing next to his mother and brother.

“Are you sure honey?”

“Yeah. We’ll be fine.”

Joyce nodded, kissing both her children on the forehead before getting up and moving towards the door with Hopper. “I’m coming too!”, two voices cried and the adults turned, seeing Nancy and Dustin standing there.

“No, you’re not. It’s safer here and I’m not risking two other kids out there tonight.”

Anticipating the protests, he firmly added, “No arguments. You kids are gonna stay here and not leave or open the door to anyone until we come back. Is that understood?” Seeing their crestfallen

expressions, he softened, “Look, we’ll bring him back, okay? It’s just that I don’t think either of us can take it if something happens to any more of you kids tonight. We’ll be back soon, okay? Don’t worry.”

Getting reluctant nods in return, both adults walked out of the house, closing the door behind them. They started down the same way Steve had taken about 15 minutes before, calling the teenager’s name. Soon, they had passed the way the boy had veered from the path and continued on, unaware that they were walking away from where he actually was.

Meanwhile, the 17-year old was walking through the woods, stumbling and barely keeping himself from collapsing, his muddled brain more focussed on ignoring the pain and staying upright than anything else. He was completely oblivious to the fact that he was nowhere near his house and unaware of the chaos he had left behind in light of his disappearance.

Notes for the Chapter:

Please leave a review! Thanks for reading!

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for the reviews! I only intended for this story to be about two chapters long but it looks like it doesn't want to be terminated quite so soon. I apologize if it seems like it's being dragged out too long but I wanted to really get a feel of Steve's characters and all his emotions. Thank you once again for reading, commenting, leaving kudos and bookmarking! I'm very grateful for the response I've gotten for this story. Thank you and drop me a review if you feel like it! Let's get down to business now. Chapter 3!

Where was he? He should've reached his house by now, right? He never had to walk through so many trees to get home though. Steve stopped suddenly, looking around. He didn't know this place, he thought absently. A hazy, distant part of his brain said that he should probably be worried seeing as it was quite late and he didn't know where he was. Unfortunately, that part was buried under the blurriness that seemed so prevalent in his head right now. He didn't know if it was a dream or reality.

He was sitting down now, swaying slightly. It was cold. He didn't have his jacket. Even though his limbs were icy cold and he could sense that, he really couldn't feel it and it didn't bother him in the slightest. Was this a dream or was this reality? He laughed suddenly... what a complete waste of space he was. His dad was right. He couldn't tell if he was dreaming or not and whatever the case was, dream or reality, he couldn't even find his way back to his house in a town that he'd lived in forever. The thought made him laugh harder. He didn't even notice when the laughter stopped and the tears came.

He didn't know how long he sat there, freezing and shedding tears for reasons even he was not fully aware of. What was he crying for? The

fact that his dad wasn't wrong about him being completely worthless when he had repeatedly tried so hard to be anything but was depressing, sure, but it certainly wasn't the only reason he was crying. So many things hurt right now. He couldn't even clearly list them all out.

It wasn't easy to reduce Steve Harrington to tears. With the life he'd lived and with the people he lived with, he had learned quickly at too young an age that tears resulted in nothing other than even more tears and harsher words. So he had learned to cry in private, muffling his sobs so that no one heard. Eventually, even that stopped and a nearly impenetrable mask was created, a mask of indifference and carefreeness, the mask of a jerk. After years and years of construction, he had a reputation, one that wasn't very flattering but it was for the best. For several years, the only people to penetrate the mask, shatter it, break him, bring out any emotion other than haughtiness and reduce him to tears were his parents. The moment he left the house, however, the mask repaired itself, snapping back into place like it had never so much as cracked.

Only his parents... until Nancy, that is. She had done it in a way that was not at all unwelcome. For once, someone made him feel good about himself. She was so beautiful, it took his breath away and he knew that she saw something in him, because a girl like Nancy would never have stayed with someone like him unless she saw some good there. For the first time in his life, he had met someone who had looked through his mask, even if not completely, and still cared. He didn't want to lose that. He didn't want to let her down. And he realised, looking back at what he had done on his rise to the top of the social ladder, on his rise to 'King Steve', that he was a bully... just like his father. He didn't want to be like dad. The thought that he was the same terrified him, even more so than being on the receiving end of his father's wrath. He wanted to be better. He wanted to be someone who didn't terrify those weaker than himself, someone who was worthy of Nancy's affection. He wanted to be the nice person he truly was, the person who had been buried long ago by a sad, lonely, scared little boy who thought that the only way to stop the hurt was to not feel 'weak' emotions like kindness again.

So he ran, away from Tommy and Carol, away from the person he

had made himself to be, away from the personality that was shaping him up to be just like his dad. He ran, and he tore down the mask himself, emerging as the humble, kind-hearted, good person he had naturally been. He had then taken this new person, his true self, over to the Byers' home, swallowing his pride, which had been surprisingly easier than expected, to apologise to Jonathan and Nancy for his behaviour. He had been disgusted with himself for what he had said about the Byers, especially Will, and the guilt wouldn't be eased until he made things right.

He couldn't have anticipated just what lay in store for him there. He freaked out, plain and simple. Up until that point, monsters only existed in childrens' closets, movies and in his parents' forms. He had almost reverted back to his cowardly self but then he realised that he wouldn't have been able to live with himself if he had actually done so. He went back, thinking that even if he died, at least he would have died saving people that were worth it and being nothing like his dad. That was satisfying enough for him. But he hadn't died, and they had won, and the rest, of course, was history.

He had been so grateful that Nancy didn't dump him after that, even though she would have been completely justified in doing so. She stayed with him and that alone gave him more of a feeling of self-worth than he had had in his entire life. He was happier than he had ever been and even his father's attempts at wearing him down didn't do as much damage as usual. Only two more years, he had thought to himself numerous times. Two years and I'll be 18 and I can leave. I can take it for two years. I have Nancy. I'll be fine.

But, of course, nothing good in his life could last too long. Nancy didn't love him, she probably never did. Why would she? He couldn't even blame her for it. He didn't deserve Nancy Wheeler. He wasn't worth love. Why did he ever think his father was wrong about him? It was his fault she left. It had to be. Why would anyone, least of all Nancy, want to be with him? It was too good to be true. He understood, he truly did, but he was human and his heart still broke, he still got angry with her for a moment, he still wanted to scream that it wasn't fair and he still wanted to weep inconsolably that his only support system had been ripped away so unceremoniously. He had felt himself starting to crumble, the ground unstable beneath his

feet. Dustin and the other kids kept him from losing himself immediately because he had something more important to worry about, keeping them safe. He had messed that up too though. He jinxed himself. 'I may be a pretty shitty boyfriend, but turns out I'm actually a pretty damn good babysitter.' Isn't that what he said? Who was he kidding? He was a shitty babysitter as well.

Can't you do anything right Steven?!

Evidently not, dad.

He looked up at some point, and some distance, not too far away, he saw bobbing lights. They were coming towards him and distantly, his first instinct was one of alarm but honestly, he was too tired to bother. His head drooped and his body felt heavy, tilting sideways to the ground. Soon, he was sprawled out on the ground, his eyes half lidded, with no desire or strength to pick himself up. Just before the approaching lights blinded him and caused him to screw his eyes tightly shut, he realised with a confusing mixture of relief and alarm, that he recognized the two figures walking towards him.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm not really sure how this chapter turned out. It's the long-awaited chapter in which Steve is finally found so I'm really sorry if it's not the best. Steve might seem a bit too emotional in the course of this fic, but I think a concussion and the situation he's in kinda justifies it. I headcannon Steve to possibly be starved of love and touch. Hopefully, it isn't too OOC in this chapter. Thank you for all the reviews, bookmarks and kudos. Thank you to everyone. Please leave a review! Constructive criticism is very welcome. I would love to hear from you.

Gentle hands were touching Steve and he panicked for a moment, forgetting that he'd recognised the two figures not a few seconds ago and his eyes snapped open in alarm. The lights from the torches pierced his eyes, sending shockwaves of pain shooting through his head. He groaned, dropping down to the ground again. Before he could hit the hard ground though, he felt strong arms catching him, lowering him to the grass gently. Blinking his eyes open, he saw two blurry forms leaning over him.

The Sherrieff. And Ms. Byers.

What were they doing here? Hopper was speaking to him but for the life of him, he just couldn't figure out what he was saying. The man frowned and then reached towards him and he felt the same arms that had caught him earlier grabbing him underneath the arms and gently sitting him up. Despite the slow, careful movement, the change in position was still too much for his body and he lurched sideways, violently throwing up everything in his stomach. He groaned in misery and absently noted that he had just barely missed Ms. Byers. She hadn't moved away though, instead rubbing his back soothingly without a hint of disgust. He felt himself going limp and would've fallen if not for the steadying arms holding him.

"Hey, hey kid! Don't fall asleep now!", Hopper said, shaking the boy

gently and pulling him up again, this time slower than before. He shifted so that he could wrap an arm around Steve's shoulders before using his free hand to gently tilt the boy's face up towards him. The boy now looked confused and upset, trying to push Hopper's hands away with an almost desperate air, mumbling something softly in a continuous, incoherent stream. The two adults looked at each other in concern before Joyce gently took the teenager's hands in hers. "Steve? It's okay sweetie. It's alright. It's just us."

Steve only seemed to get more distressed at that, trying to shift out of their grips and looking from his surroundings to them frantically. His mumbling got louder, enough that they could understand the slurred words.

"No... no... shouldn't be here... "

"What's he talking about?", Joyce said, looking worried.

"He's really out of it. No doubt he has a concussion. Kid probably doesn't even know where he is or what's going on right now.", Hopper said, gently probing what looked like quite a deep cut on Steve's forehead. His fingers came away bright red with blood and he grimaced, sympathy arising anew within him. He was so done with seeing sick, injured, traumatised, hurting children. He didn't want to go there again, didn't want to think about the child he had already so unfairly lost. It seemed that in every situation, the kids got the worst of it. Suddenly, the teenager between him and Joyce suddenly went still, making them look at him even more closely in alarm.

"Steve?", Joyce tried again and the boy's attention turned to her and his brow furrowed.

"Sherriff? Ms. Byers? What... what are you doing here?", his voice was steady and anyone would think he was perfectly fine if not for the dark mess of bruises and cuts on his face.

"We came looking for you kid. You just up and disappeared.", Hopper said.

"I was gonna go home. I think I got lost.", he said quietly.

For a second, he didn't know why he felt tears forming in his eyes and cascading down his cheeks before he could stop them. He was too tired to attempt to wipe them away.

"I can't even go home by myself. What's wrong with me?", he gasped out through the tears.

He looked at Joyce, who now looked so, so sad. Did he make her sad? He didn't want to make her sad. Why did he do that to people? Is that why no one liked him? Is that why no one stayed? But then he felt her arms wrap around him securely, his face pressed against her shoulder.

"Don't say that. Don't... There's nothing wrong with you sweetheart. Nothing at all."

"I didn't want to bother you.", he choked out into her sweater, "I... I didn't want to be... be a burden. I'm sorry... I'm s-sorry..."

"Nothing to be sorry about kid.", a strong hand squeezing his shoulder.

"He's right. You're not a burden. You never will be." Joyce was hugging him tighter now, one of her hands buried in his brown hair, gently stroking it. It felt... nice. Is this what it was like to have a loving mother? The most love his mother had given him was telling him that there was food in the pantry and money in the closet should he need it. He cried harder into the woman's shoulder, a coherent thought breaking through the concussion he had received.

A woman he had hardly even spoken to and who had no obligation towards him had noticed his absence and left her house in the middle of the night, when she could have spent that time with her two children who she had almost lost that day, to come out to look for him in the woods. And now she was hugging him while he cried on her shoulder like a child instead of pushing him away in disgust. This woman, who was practically a stranger, was more motherly to him than the woman he actually belonged to. How messed up was that? It hurt, and even though he thought that he had come to accept it a long time back, it was breaking his heart all over again, like someone was driving a jagged piece of glass through it and stomping on it with

a vengeance. The heartbreak manifested it self in more tears, he didn't even think he could cry harder than he already was, but he was being surprised an awful lot today. Joyce said nothing, simply pulling him in tighter and allowing him to press his face harder into her shoulder, soothing words that he couldn't hear clearly spilling from her lips. The large, callused hand on his shoulder had moved to the base of his neck, the warm weight comforting and welcome.

"Mom... mom never wants to hug me.", he said in a small voice.

"Oh... you poor boy...", her voice was cracking and again, he felt terrible for making her cry.

"I'm sorry... I didn't... sorry..."

"Stop apologising kid. It's not your fault. It never has been."

He sniffled, not convinced but too tired to argue. He was already exhausted and the outpouring of suppressed emotion had now completely drained him. He felt himself sway, the two pairs of arms tightening around him. He fell into a daze, exhaustion and his concussion working together. Vaguely, he heard the comforting voices talking above his head before a warm weight settled on his shoulders. Gentle arms were still cradling him, hands running through his hair and he wouldn't have minded staying that way forever. But hands were guiding him to stand, taking most of his weight and leading him somewhere he knew would be safe. He followed trustingly, stumbling often enough that he was soon being lifted by strong arms and carried. He didn't even have it in him to be embarrassed anymore. He felt himself laying down soon after, his head pillowed. Someone was holding his hand, another hand on his forehead. He looked up towards the person, and the last thing he would remember thinking was that he didn't know angels existed.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry about the wait. I hit a bit of a block and I'm the least pleased with this chapter. Also, I'm not quite an expert on concussions, so forgive me if there are any factual mistakes in the following chapters. Chalk it down to fiction if there are. I'm sorry for any and all mistakes, grammatical or otherwise. Thank you for your interest in this story so far! Please leave a review when your done! Thank you!

While Hopper hadn't expected it to be easy to locate their missing party member or bring him back, he still had not been prepared for everything that transpired in the woods. He glanced at the rear-view mirror and saw Joyce sitting in the backseat with Steve's head on her lap, leaning over him and speaking to him softly. The boy had stopped crying but the red-rimmed eyes and wet cheeks gave him away. Joyce had one of his hands in hers, the other gently wiping his face, being careful of the cuts. Steve seemed to be in another world, a dream world, occasionally emerging into states of lucidity, but those were coming further and further apart. He was worried and stopped the car for a moment, turning around to face Joyce who was looking at him questioningly. He reached back towards the boy, gently tapping the teenager's cheek. The boy's eyes moved slowly to his face and he looked confused.

"Hey kid, you with us?"

Steve didn't answer and Hopper sighed before meeting Joyce's worried eyes. "We have to take him to the hospital." That simple statement seemed to be a violent trigger and Steve bolted upright, startling both adults.

"No!", he said vehemently, "No hospital!"

"Woah kid, calm down.", Hopper tried while Joyce tried to calm him down.

“You can’t take me to the hospital Chief! Please!”, and Hopper was surprised to see that his eyes were as clear as they could be in his state. He was lucid at the moment. That didn’t last very long. He seemed to revert back into his dream state where he saw what Hopper could only assume were memories buried deep in his mind. Hopper wondered what he would feel if he was all there right now. The teen was obviously a very private person and in his state, he had said things and revealed secrets he had kept for so long and behaved in a way that he never would have otherwise.

While Hopper and Joyce didn’t think any less of him, he knew Steve would be mortified if he remembered what he’d said and done. This would, in a way, feel like a breach of privacy and Hopper hoped for his sake that he didn’t remember. But the Sherriff still felt the need to have a few words with Steve’s parents. They obviously weren’t the model parents they presented themselves to be if Steve’s statement about his mother was any indication. That could bring about new problems but they could worry about that later. Steve was saying something frantically again and Joyce was trying desperately to calm him. Hopper almost couldn’t hear him over the fast, panicked breaths but the longer he listened, the clearer the words became.

“... no hospital. No hospital... Mom and dad will be so mad... please... they’ll be so angry... can’t spend any more... I’m not worth it...”

Hopper was stunned even though he had guessed that Steve’s parents weren’t the best. He looked at Joyce, the woman looked both horrified and sad. The Harringtons were one of the richest families in town and everyone had assumed that their only child, Steve, was a pampered, spoiled brat and admittedly, the kid had played that part to a T. But here the kid was, afraid that his parents would be angry about a possible hospital bill. Had they really told him that he wasn’t worth spending money on? That was cruel even for negligent parents. Hopper now wondered how deep the neglect went. If the Harringtons were emotionally abusing their son, was that the limit of what they had done or had they ever laid a hand on him? He hoped that it was the former. The Sherriff definitely did not trust them enough to give them the benefit of the doubt.

John Harrington was a large man, and in comparison to his father,

even athletic jock Steve Harrington was no match. Add to that the fact that he boy clearly wasn't the greatest at throwing a punch and that the man was an intimidating authority figure all through his life, and Hopper knew that the boy wouldn't have fought back even if he could. He did know not to throw around such severe allegations though, despite his growing anger towards the Harringtons and protectiveness towards Steve. He knew that as an officer of the law, he was obliged to call Steve's parents to inform them of their son's state, since there was no real proof that they had been mistreating their son. But he wasn't going to do that till he spoke to Steve and made sure that wasn't the case. He had more important problems at present. Steve had gone still now, exhausted.

"Sherriff... Ms. Byers... please... no hospital... please...", he sounded defeated and desperate at the same time, with the air of someone who didn't usually get a choice in anything that concerned him. They couldn't do that to him, drag him to a hospital when he was clearly afraid. It felt too cruel.

"Okay Steve, listen to me kid. We'll call a doctor I know to Joyce's house. We won't take you to the hospital but you need a doctor alright?"

"But... bills... they'll be mad..."

"Don't worry about the bills sweetheart. Your parents will never know. I promise. No one will tell them."

The teenager seemed somewhat more relaxed after Joyce's reassurance and Hopper turned back to the steering wheel, starting the car up. Steve settled back into his previous position, with his head pillowed on Joyce's lap and one of her hands stroking his hair while the other held his hand in a reassuring grip. There was silence for a few minutes before Steve started to move around, grabbing Joyce's attention.

"He okay back there?"

"I don't know. Steve, honey, it's alright."

Steve seemed to hear her, his movements stalling and he stared at

her, not blinking. He slowly reached out on hand towards her face and the woman didn't move, allowing him to place his fingers on her cheek, his touch feather light.

“...Mom?”

Hopper almost stopped the car again in shock. To her credit, Joyce didn't show any outward reaction other than smiling lovingly at the boy and Hopper was struck by how much at ease she was in the role of a mother, she cared so much about kids who weren't even hers.

“...Mom? Is that you? Don't leave again... please?”, the boy whispers. Hopper's fingers tighten on the wheel, he was angry. Furiously so. Some time back, the boy had said his mother hadn't ever wanted to hug him and Jim had been appalled. A mother who didn't give her child the basic love they thrived on wasn't much of one in his eyes. And yet, the boy still wanted his mother. The Sherriff knew what he was seeing here, and he didn't like it one bit. It seemed that Steve was starved of the love and touch of a parent, he had convinced everyone around him that he was fine, maybe even believing it himself, but he wasn't and in his vulnerable state now, it was obvious. His attention was drawn back to the backseat where Steve was now pulling his hand back, looking perplexed.

“You're... you're not my mom.”

“...”

“... no, hon. I'm not.”

“Oh.”

His hand dropped back towards his chest and he turned away, not looking at her. He looked disappointed, awkward and scared. Joyce took his hand again, threading her fingers through his and squeezing it in silent reassurance.

“I... I'm sorry Ms. Byers... I thought... I'm really sorry. I didn't...”

“It's okay, Steve. It's alright. I understand.”

“It's just... I should've known... it was too good to be true.”

He looked so sad. Joyce bent down to kiss his head much to his surprise. He still said nothing, turning away again, but not attempting to pull away from her or release her hold on his hand. Barely two minutes later, they pulled into the Byers' front yard, Jonathan already running to meet them, his expression worried. Before Jonathan reached them, Hopper was already opening the backseat door, helping Steve up. Steve was normal now, as much as he could be, all things considered. He had withdrawn back into the teenager they knew, his emotions locked up again. He somehow looked more alert now and a bit embarrassed, if the light flush on his cheeks was anything to go by. He wouldn't meet either Hopper or Joyce's eyes, but turned to look at Jonathan when he reached them.

"Mom! Is he... Steve! Are you okay?"

The one in question nodded, a brittle smile on his face. "As good as I can be I guess." The other boy frowned but didn't say anything, reaching towards Steve to help him up. Hopper was taking his other arm and Steve pulled away, pushing both of them away slightly.

"Steve?", Joyce asked, placing an arm on his.

The boy didn't reply, his eyes seeking out Jonathan. "Are they still awake? Your brother and the others?"

"Well, they refused to go to sleep till you came back but they falling into a doze in the living room. Nancy is with them now. They keep waking up to ask about you."

Steve nodded, pushing himself up and out of the car. He stumbled, and Jonathan grabbed his elbow to steady him. He tried to shrug out of the grip but the other boy didn't let go. "Let go Jonathan.", he said quietly, his eyes pleading, "Please." Jonathan bit his lip, "Steve, you're hurt man. Let us help you."

The teen smiled and pulled away, "You already have."

"But..."

"They shouldn't have to see me like that."

There was a pause before Hopper said, "They'll understand kid."

“I know they will. But they already dealt with this.”, he said, gesturing to his face, “I don’t want to scare them anymore.”

The others nodded reluctantly, realising he wasn’t going to be moved. They couldn’t stand here arguing forever. That didn’t stop Hopper from staying close as they walked to the front porch, in case the boy stumbled. Steve took a deep breath before following Jonathan into his house, praying that his legs didn’t give out in front of the kids.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone for all the reviews, kudos and bookmarks! I never expected this story to garner such a response, I really appreciate it! Updates will be a little slower now, I wish I could update faster, but college and real life intervene. I hope you don't mind. Thank you again for your response and please leave a review!

When they walked into the dimmed living room, Nancy perked up from where she was sitting on the couch, her brother and Will on either side, leaning against her, sleeping. The other kids were all around the room, on chairs or on the floor, their heads dipped down towards their chests as they slept. Nancy smiled at Steve, her expression both relieved and worried. He smiled back, a genuine smile. She always could bring him to smile genuinely, even now that she wasn't with him anymore. Across the room, Dustin muttered something, lifting his head, still half asleep. He caught sight of the newcomers and his eyes snapped open fully before he lunged to his feet crying out in a loud voice, "Steve!!"

Steve winced at the loud sound, even more so when the kids started to stir, but before he could think too much about it, he was being tackled around the waist by a small blur and he stumbled backwards, Hopper and Jonathan steadying him with a hand on his back. Dustin frowned up at the older boy, still not letting go, and Steve smiled at him, ruffling his hair with one hand while the other wrapped around his shoulders. By this time, all the children were fully awake and crowding around the teenager, shouting questions and elbowing each other as they fought to hug him. Steve was smiling wider now, looking lighter than he had the whole time.

"Hey you guys, calm down! I'm fine okay? Don't worry."

"You just disappeared!", Dustin yelled.

"Yeah! Dustin and the others were worried", Mike said, refusing to

admit that he had been worried as well. Steve smirked at the boy, amused. He was happy to see the kids but his head really hurt. He was so tired.

“Kids.”, Joyce interrupted, seeing that Steve was at the end of his strength, even though he was doing an admirable job of hiding it. They started to protest but she gave them her most effective mom look. “No. It’s late and Steve is hurt. You’re all going to bed. You can talk to Steve tomorrow if he’s feeling better.” The kids nodded reluctantly, detaching themselves from Steve and moving away slowly, except Dustin, who still hung on, burying his face in Steve’s chest. The teenager put his arms around the younger boy, lowering his head a little to talk to him.

“Hey bud, it’s okay. I’m fine alright? I’m sorry I scared you.”

Dustin hugged him tighter still and looked at him with wide eyes. Geez, all the kids were looking at him like that now. “You really scared us, Steve. Don’t ever do that again... please.”

“I won’t. It’s okay guys. You should go to sleep now, all of you. Stop worrying. I’m not going anywhere.”, he gave them all reassuring looks, feeling fondness arising in him, and the children seemed satisfied enough, Dustin squeezing him one last time before letting go. A part of Steve already missed the touch but he said nothing, instead sitting down on the couch next to Will, who hadn’t been able to get up before.

“Hey, are you alright?”, he asked the small boy, who still looked sickly pale. Will nodded, placing his small hand on Steve’s, “I’m fine. Thank you, Steve. I heard what you did for the others. I’m glad you’re okay.”

Steve would be lying if he said he wasn’t touched at the action. He smiled at the boy, placing his other hand over the small one covering his own. Joyce broke the silence, “Hopper and I’ll get you kids some blankets and pillows. Nancy, you stay with them. Jonathan, can you take Steve to your room?”

Jonathan nodded and everyone moved to their assigned tasks and just as Steve was about to get off the sofa, Nancy hugged him, kissing

his cheek. “Don’t you ever scare me like that again Steve Harrington.”

He blinked and then she was gone, ushering the kids to where they could sleep. He stared at her for a while and then shook his head before getting up and looking at Jonathan, who was waiting patiently for him by the door.

Jonathan flipped on the light in his room, closing the door behind him and Steve. He moved some books and papers from his bed to the nearby table and turned to look at the other boy. Steve was leaning against the bedroom wall, looking extremely tired all of a sudden and what area of his skin wasn’t bruised was paper white. His eyes were dull and he looked shaky and sick. Oh hell, Jonathan thought, before rushing forward towards the other boy. He reached him just as the taller boy’s legs gave out, catching him under the arms. He staggered under the weight, “Steve! Dammit!”

The strength Steve had miraculously gained in his bid to not scare the kids was gone and he groaned miserably into Jonathan’s shoulder as the other boy managed to drag him to his bed, sitting him on the edge. He blinked, tired, he was so tired, but someone was shaking him gently and he opened his eyes to stare through half-lidded eyes at the person who seemed so intent on annoying him. Funny, he didn’t recall closing his eyes before.

Jonathan gripped Steve’s elbows, shaking him as he tried to keep the other boy conscious. He couldn’t fall asleep before someone checked on him. Sorry man, Jonathan thought guiltily before smacking his face lightly. The boy roused slightly which Jonathan counted as a victory. “Sorry.”, the other boy groaned. “Don’t worry about it. Just don’t fall asleep.” Steve brought up a hand to his head, lightly rubbing his temple. Jonathan got up from where he was kneeling in front of Steve to sit next to him, placing his arm around Steve’s shoulders in case he fell. The teenager didn’t react, not shrugging the arm off.

Just as Jonathan was about to call for his mother, the door opened and Joyce and Hopper came in, their arms filled with supplies. They stopped short at the sight in front of them, and in a second, they were

by the boys' side. "What happened?", Joyce asked, her voice worried. She sat next to Steve and Hopper knelt in front of the pale, shaky boy, gripping his arms gently. All of the three people in the room were staring at him and Steve was starting to feel slightly self-conscious and a bit guilty for worrying them.

"I'm okay.", he said, raising his head to look at Hopper. "Really.", he added when he saw the disbelieving looks.

"He almost passed out.", Jonathan told his mother and the Sherriff, ignoring the betrayed look Steve shot him.

"Alright kid, I called a doc, he's a friend, he'll check you over, make sure you brain doesn't turn to mush in the near future.", Hopper said, talking to make sure the teenager didn't fall asleep. "He won't tell your parents, I promise. None of us will.", he added in a hurry when he saw the rising panic in the boy's eyes.

Jonathan, who had no clue of what had happened, asked with some disbelief, "You didn't talk to his parents? They must be worried! Why...", he trailed off, surprised that Hopper had actually agreed to not call Steve's parents. He was startled when Steve let out a laugh, almost hysterical and completely humourless.

"Worried? They don't care. They're not even home. They wouldn't care if they were.", Steve said, the laughter dying out by the last statement, his voice coming out choked. Joyce and Hopper had heard similar statements earlier that night, but it didn't hurt any less when the boy said it. It hurt more actually, after seeing the boy put on a brave face in front of the younger children because he didn't want to scare them. It was apparent now that since the children couldn't see him, his injuries and emotions had overwhelmed him again. The world was definitely messed up bad, when someone who cared so much about others didn't get any of that care or love himself. Joyce thought, not for the first time that night, how unfair the world was.

Jonathan, who was completely unaware of what his mother and Hopper had discovered about Steve when they had gone to found him, was stunned, his expression filling with dawning comprehension and horror. He turned to look at his mother, speechless. She looked at him, her expression softening and gave him a small smile, "Honey,

can you give us a moment?" Jonathan nodded, looking stricken. He cast one last look at the taller boy, who was looking away from all three of them, before walking out of the room and closing the door.

"Steve? Hon-", Joyce started, before Steve interrupted, still looking away, "You know Ms. Byers... I think they'd actually be happier than they've ever been if I just vanish." He turned to look at them, his eyes wet. He swallowed, finding his voice before whispering, "I think they hated me even before I was born." One tear broke free, streaking down his face and he dropped his gaze, looking at the ground.

Hopper only hesitated for a split second before hugging the teen. He was surprised when instead of pulling away, the boy wrapped his arms around him, his head dropping onto the Sheriff's shoulder. Joyce was there the next second, her arms around Steve as well. She didn't say anything and just held him. The teen didn't make a noise but Hopper felt tears slowly soaking into his uniform. He closed his eyes, at a loss of what to do. He had never been emotionally invested in a case like this before. It felt different this time.

"Why do they hate me? What did I do wrong?", the voice was still a whisper.

"Nothing kid. Nothing.", Hopper said gruffly.

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for the response! It's been overwhelming and I'm very grateful for all the support and love for this story. I really appreciate it! You are the best! Thank you so much! I love you guys! I'm not sure how long this story will be. It was intended to be a very short one but ideas kept popping in and well, we're at chapter 7 now! I'm having a lot of fun writing this story. That said, I hope it's not too stretched out. Reviews are so welcome so please leave one! I'll try to update as soon as possible. Thank you!

Steve flinched as the doctor shined a light into his eye. "Definitely a concussion, but not a very bad one. He did lose consciousness so you'll have to monitor him for 24 hours. There's no need to take him to the hospital now, but if he gets worse don't hesitate to do so. I'll prescribe some painkillers.", the doctor, Phil Keaton, said to Hopper and Joyce.

He was an old friend of Hopper's, they'd known each other since school. He was a bit surprised when Jim had asked him not to tell anyone about this house call. He had wondered why but trusted his friend enough to agree. He had been shocked, to say the least, when he found out who his patient was. The older Byers boy, pale and tired, had answered the door and Phil had tiptoed around six sleeping children and a young teenage girl before being led into a bedroom. Steve Harrington was sitting on the bed, Ms. Byers and Hopper sitting next to him with an arm around him. The boy was looking down at the ground as Hopper spoke quietly to him and his head snapped up when Phil entered. Now the doctor was used to seeing plenty of worse injuries but the boy's state still came as a shock to him.

Hawkins was a small town, everyone knew everyone else's business and Steve Harrington definitely had a reputation, one that wasn't very flattering. Phil had heard that he had become a much nicer person but he hadn't really believed it. After all, the boy was known

for years for being a spoiled, rich brat who didn't fit into this small town. The Harrington family didn't fit in as a whole, one of the richest families in the town with little to no friends. The parents were always polite but formal and cold and their only child was well known as a bully with a large ego. Despite his reputation, the Harrington boy wasn't known for getting into too many fights, the last one being with the Byers boy, which was partly the reason the doctor was surprised to see him in the Byers' home. There was no hint of the unlikable, egotistic bully now, as he sat there staring at the doctor, there was only a hurt, exhausted child and despite his impression of the teenager, the doctor felt genuine sympathy for him. His face looked like someone had been determined to destroy the handsome features and he looked exhausted, his eyes tired and red. The boy stared before looking at the other two adults in the room. The other boy, Jonathan, had already left after shooting a pained, sympathetic look at the teen.

"It's okay kid. This is Phil, my friend. He's a doc-". Hopper began.

"I know him.", Steve said quietly, "Dad does too..."

"He won't tell your dad sweetie. Don't worry.", Joyce told the boy reassuringly.

Despite the numerous questions popping into his head, the doctor realised it wasn't the time and instead pulled up a chair to sit in front of the boy. "May I?", he asked the boy who gave him a rather distrustful look before looking to Hopper for an answer. He must have found what he was looking for because he nodded slightly at the doctor, although he still looked wary. The man pushed back the thick, brown hair to better inspect the cut on the boy's forehead, prodding it lightly. The teen winced and the doctor pulled back. "That doesn't need stitches.", he told the two adults.

After checking over the other injuries on the boy's face, and bandaging the worst, he leaned back. "He can rest now. No television, school or strenuous activities for a few days. Wake him up every 2 hours to check on him."

"You can sleep here Steve. Jonathan won't mind.", Joyce said, standing up.

“Uh... Ms. Byers... I can't do that...”

“Nonsense. Go to sleep. I'll get you a blanket.”

The teenager didn't have the strength to argue anymore and knew a lost cause when he saw one. He shifted and the doctor's sharp eye caught his tiny wince. ‘Are you hurt anywhere else?’, he asked. Steve froze, his eyes guilty and panicked. Now, Joyce and Hopper's attention was back on him and he shifted uncomfortably. “I'm fine. Just my face.”

“Kid...”, Hopper said quietly.

The boy said nothing but looked away, shaking. Before the others said anything, Joyce was in front of the boy, kneeling and taking his trembling hands in hers. He flinched but still didn't look up at her. She spoke softly to him so that only he heard, “It's okay sweetie. It's alright. You can tell me. Nothing bad will happen if you tell me.” By now, the two men had stepped back a little, allowing the woman and the teen to have a quiet, private conversation.

“How do you know?”, he asked, finally looking up, his eyes desperate and pleading.

“I promise. We'll do everything we can to make this better.”

Steve frowned, confusion filling his eyes, “Why?”

“Why what, hon?”

He shook his head, still looking confused and a little frustrated. “Why do you even care?”, he whispered.

Joyce had to fight to keep her composure. He was asking this so seriously, like the concept of someone caring about him was impossible. What had John and Joan Harrington done to this child? How could they not realise how lucky they were that this beautiful boy was theirs? Joyce had two boys that she loved very much and she couldn't imagine a parent not loving their child, especially a sweet, selfless one like Steve. They didn't deserve him, she thought fiercely as she looked at the child in front of her. Children were a gift and the Harringtons didn't deserve theirs. They didn't, he was too

good for them and he deserved better. So much better.

She was angry that they had hurt him, that he had felt the need to build a mask that hid such deep wounds and insecurities, and even though it wasn't her fault, she was angry that she hadn't noticed. She had never spoken to him before this whole ordeal with the Upside Down, but she had known of him since he was a child. She hadn't thought in her wildest dreams that that little brunette child had hidden such a secret for so long. Honestly, if his injuries hadn't loosened his tongue, Joyce was pretty sure they still wouldn't have known. Looking the teen in the eyes as he looked at her, awaiting an answer, she told him the truth.

"Because you're worth it."

She saw the surprise in his eyes, the quivering of his lip as he swallowed hard. "My ribs.", he finally confessed. She smiled, even though she wanted to cry, kissing him on his forehead gently before looking at the others. The doctor walked towards him and Joyce got up to give him some room when a hand hesitantly latched onto hers. Steve was holding it lightly, ready to let go at the first sight of irritation. She understood, curling her fingers around the younger ones grasping hers and noted with sadness the relief in his posture when she didn't pull away.

"Steve?", Phil asked quietly, realising that this was a delicate situation. Steve looked at him and nodded, already tugging his shirt up slightly. There was a sharp intake of breath as Steve lifted his shirt, yellowing bruises along his ribs, moving around his sides and spreading to his back.

"It's not that bad.", he said quietly, his eyes begging them to believe him, "It doesn't even hurt that bad anymore."

"Until today you mean.", Phil said, already checking his ribs.

"Well, yeah."

"I'm going to wrap it up. Stay still."

There was silence as the doctor worked and Steve was almost asleep

by the time he was done. Hopper gently pushed him to lie down and Steve complied quite easily, falling asleep almost before his head hit the pillow, curling onto his side. Joyce draped a blanket over him and sat down on the chair nearby. Phil looked at the two adults and said very seriously, “Jim, Joyce, we need to have a serious talk about this kid.”

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

Guys, I am so, so, so sorry for the delay! It was way too long and I'm so sorry I left you guys hanging! I won't try making up an excuse, but I will apologise once more. I'm sorry! I also apologise in advance if this chapter is too rushed and not up to the mark or any other issues. And thank you! Thank you so very much for all the love for this story! I never anticipated such a response and I truly appreciate every one of you. Thank you! Please leave a review! I would love to hear from you!

“What’s going on Jim?”, Phil Keaton asked his old friend. “Just what happened to this kid?”

Hopper and Joyce hesitated, looking at each other. Dreading the reply, the doctor, much quieter, voiced his suspicions, “Was it a family member?”

He noticed how both of them flinched though he saw Jim’s honesty when he replied, “No. it wasn’t. It was Billy Hargrove.”

“Hargrove? The new family that moved in?”, Phil asked, surprised that the teenager asleep on the bed just a few feet away had already picked a fight with the new kid.

Perhaps picking up on his train of thoughts, Joyce frowned, a protective tone rising in her voice as she defended the boy, “He didn’t start it Phil. This wasn’t his fault.”

“She’s right. Hargrove attacked a younger kid and Steve defended him.”, Hopper added.

“In that case, I hope you are going to press charges. This is quite a serious case of assault.”, the doctor said, frowning.

“Oh, he isn’t going to get off easy, don’t worry.”, Hopper said mildly,

though his eyes promised more than a few stern words to the other teen.

“Still...”, the other man said slowly, grabbing both Joyce and Hopper’s attention, “That still doesn’t explain his bruised ribs. Those are a few days old Jim. Billy Hargrove may have aggravated them but he sure didn’t cause them. And you don’t want me telling Harrington’s parents either. You gonna tell me what happened to this kid?”

“We don’t know... not really anyway.”, he looking pained as he said it, like the words had been dragged through jagged glass and Joyce looked away as well, swallowing. The doctor was even more suspicious now.

“The bruised ribs... they’re from someone he knows, aren’t they? His father...?”, he asked, more insistent now.

“We don’t know that yet, Phil.”, Hopper said, his eyes pleading, “He said some things, but nothing is for certain.”

“But you suspect it. You know we’ve both seen cases like this before. His behaviour, the injuries, aren’t your instincts telling you this is one of those cases?”, the question was filled with hushed anger, the desperation of a man who had seen far too many similar cases and hated them with a passion.

“I can’t go around throwing such serious accusations without proof! You know that!”, Hopper growled, frustration building in his voice.

“Jim.”, his friend said, quiet and serious, obviously very worried about the boy, “If his father is hurting him...”

“He is. That much is clear.”, Joyce interjected softly, not even looking at the two men as she gently brushed her hand through the boy’s soft hair.

“We need to do something then! It could get worse. We can’t let him go back to them if-”

“I know that. I’m the last person who wants to send this kid back to his parents. But we have no proof. All the kid has admitted to is

being neglected. And that was under the effects of a concussion. We have nothing else. It'll never stand legally, even if we all believe him. Besides, knowing him, Steve is going to deny everything once he's better. Circumstantial evidence is all we've got. If we have to take him away from them, it'll take a lot more than a few bruises and a confession when he wasn't in his right mind. We have to wait... talk to him when he wakes up."

There was a tense silence as everyone momentarily got lost in their own thoughts. Finally, the doctor spoke again, his voice quieter than it had been, "Those bruises on his ribs... he probably got them from being shoved hard into a table counter. I suspect there were other injuries... probably healed before we saw them."

"He just said his mother never wanted to hug him. And he was terrified just at the thought of going to the hospital. He... he said that they'd be angry.", Joyce said to the two men, turning watery eyes to Hopper and the man turned away. What could he do? He was powerless for now.

"Something is clearly very wrong in his home life. I don't like this.", Phil said. "I trust you to get to the bottom of this?", he directed the question at the sheriff, looking troubled.

"You know I will."

The doctor nodded, "I'll leave now then. Don't hesitate to call me if something happens." He paused, remembering his own teenage son asleep at home. He couldn't imagine anything like this happening to him and the father in him was angry and heart-broken. The doctor in him was impassive enough though, as he turned to his friend, even though a tiny pleading tone entered his voice, "You know what to do. Take care of him."

Hopper noticed the tiny falter and only because he had known the man for years. He understood a father's pain at seeing a child, whether his own or not, suffer. He nodded, sincerity obvious in his heartfelt thank you. The doctor showed himself out and another tense silence filled the room. There were way too many of those in the last few, short hours.

Joyce stood up, careful not to wake up the sleeping teenager. She wouldn't meet Hopper's eyes. "Will you stay with him? I'll be right back." She didn't wait for a reply, sweeping out of the room quickly.

Jim sighed, sitting in the empty chair next to the bed. Monsters like the ones from the Upside Down he could fight, then why was he so helpless against monsters in this world? If only they were as easy to deal with as the supernatural.

Joyce left the room with every intention to let out the overwhelming feelings but what she didn't expect was to see her oldest child slumped against the wall just outside his bedroom. He was asleep, obviously exhausted after the day's events. She slowly knelt next to him and gently shook his shoulder.

Her boy startled awake with a gasp and she just escaped being headbutted. He looked disoriented and confused and Joyce felt a surge of love for her beautiful child, one of the two most precious gifts God had given her. She smiled despite the situation, stroking his hair back affectionately, "Honey, why don't you go ahead and get some rest... in a real bed.", she teased. "Use my bedroom for tonight."

Jonathan was awake now though and more alert, he looked at his mother with a questioning stare, "Steve? What happened to him, mom? Is he okay?"

"He will be fine, honey, don't worry. He has a concussion. We just need to monitor him for a while but he'll be okay."

"Wha- Mom... before... he said they wouldn't care. His parents... Why would...", he trailed off, unable to find the words. Joyce understood though, but she didn't want to tell her son, for both the boys' sakes. Steve wouldn't want more people knowing, especially not a peer of his and Jonathan, he would worry. He wouldn't know how to act around Steve. But knowing her son, he would find out himself eventually.

Deciding to would be better if he heard it from her, she sighed, "We... we aren't sure about his parents. They aren't home now so he might be here for a while. Steve doesn't want them to know... it must

be bad.”, she said softly.

Looking at her boy's face she wasn't surprised to see pain and empathy swirling in wet eyes. She knew how hard it was for her children to deal with her ex-husband's behaviour. Jonathan knew how Steve felt, at least partly, even if that part was tiny. Lonnie had never laid a hand on either of her children and for that Joyce was more than thankful. Now she only wished the same case was for Steve but that possibility was getting more and more unlikely.

Her son's voice got through to her then, “Why? Why do they do this to their kids?” he sounded so sad and she knew that her son had never wished on anyone the kind of relationship he had with his father. And now there was someone in a worse situation and deep inside, Jonathan knew it and the knowledge was killing him. She embraced him tightly as his grief for his own problems and Steve's mixed into an agonising cocktail. How easy it was to forget that they were still so young with heartache and problems in the real world and not hardened soldiers.

Unbeknown to her and the other adult in the house, they both had had extremely similar thoughts. The monsters in this world were SO much more difficult to deal with than the ones in the real world. Humanity was its own biggest enemy. The real monsters were us.

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

A/N: I am so, so sorry for the delay. I haven't forgotten about you readers. This story was always in the back of my mind. I did write this chapter in a hurry because I didn't want to keep you guys waiting any longer so I'm sorry if it isn't the best piece of writing. Thank you for all the Kudos, reviews and bookmarks! I really appreciate it! Reviews are love! Thank you for your patience and your love!

Joyce woke up early the next morning after having quite a fitful sleep. Hopper had insisted that she went to bed while he looked after Steve. She peeked into the room now and saw both Steve and Hopper fast asleep, Steve sprawled out in the bed with more colour in his cheeks than the previous sickly white and Hopper slumped uncomfortably in a chair next to the bed. She winced, knowing that he would be sore when he woke up. But he looked so tired so instead, she draped a blanket over him and gently closed the door behind her. She had checked on both her sons and the other children and they were all fast asleep as well, exhausted from the late, stressful night before.

She quietly made her way into the kitchen, deciding that she had better get started on breakfast, what with eleven people in the house, most with ravenous appetites. As she worked, her thoughts went back to what had happened the previous night. She had almost lost her son and that thought had haunted her sleep to the point that she just lay there, awake, fighting the urge to go check on her son and every other child in the house. Not to mention, Bob. She felt tears unbidden, remembering his horrific death. Tears blurring her vision, she moved away from the stove, gripping the table at the side, trying to swallow back the tears.

She startled when a hand landed hesitatingly on her shoulder and a young, quiet voice said uncertainly, "Ms. Byers?" Looking up quickly, she gasped, immediately wiping her eyes and smiling at the person in front of her. It was Steve, a blanket draped over his shoulders and

still looking tired and sick, looking at her worriedly, his eyes filled with a strange combination of understanding, sympathy and some fear. "Are you alright?", he asked, looking uncertain as his hand dropped away from her shoulder.

"I'm alright sweetheart. Don't worry about me. You shouldn't even be out of bed yet.", she said, her voice surprisingly steady as she ushered him to sit in one of the chairs, pulling the blanket up over his shoulders again as it started to slip. His hair was sticking up, untidy in a way he never let himself be seen in public and Joyce felt a smile creep onto her face. He looked so much younger than usual, she thought as her hands seemed to automatically move to smooth down the mess. He blinked, surprised at the gesture before frowning and repeating his earlier question, "Are you alright Ms. Byers? You were... you seemed upset."

She smiled at him, running her hand over his hair one last time before moving away slightly to turn off the stove where the coffee was brewing. Then she turned back to him, saying just loud enough for him to hear, "I was just thinking about Bob." Steve immediately looked both sympathetic and sad, dropping eye contact, "I'm sorry about Bob, Ms. Byers, he was a really nice guy."

"You knew him?", she asked, surprised. "Not really. But everyone knew Bob. He was...famous I guess. His reputation was one of a really good guy."

Shaking her thoughts of Bob, she looked closely at Steve again and remarked, "You still look tired. Why did you get up?"

"I couldn't sleep anymore.", he replied.

There was silence for a while as both Steve and Joyce didn't know what to say and she turned her attention back to making breakfast. She only turned around to speak after nearly 15 minutes. Turning around, she saw that Steve resting his head on his folded arms slumped over in his chair. His eyes were closed as he dozed but as if sensing her eyes on him, his eyes slid open and he flushed, sitting up straight.

"It's alright.", she said mildly, "I don't mind. You need to rest

anyway.”

“N-no. I guess... I should get going.”, he said hurriedly, picking himself up from the chair, dropping the blanket onto the back of the chair. “Thank you, Ms. By-“, he began before Joyce interrupted him. “Sit down before you fall Steve.” She had already walked up to him, gripping his arm lightly and gently guiding him back into the chair.

The boy started to protest but Joyce hushed him, “You’re hurt honey. Please just let us take care of you.”

The words seemed to have more of an effect on the teen than she expected as his eyes widened almost comically before confusion took its place.

“What is it?”, Joyce prompted gently.

“It’s nothing. I just... don’t understand.”

Joyce had a good idea of what he meant but didn’t push, instead asking what they all had asked when Steve had left the previous night. “Why did you leave Steve?”

His voice was quiet when he replied, so unlike his brash, loud image. “I didn’t want to cause any trouble. I just didn’t think anyone would miss me.”

“Oh Steve.”, she whispered, reaching down to take his hand in hers. He tensed but didn’t pull away.

“Why?”. He asked finally, looking at her, frustration clear in his voice.

“Why what sweetie?”, she asked, confused.

He suddenly pulled away from her, standing up almost violently and moving several steps away from her. “Stop! Stop it! Why are you doing this to me?!” he asked, obviously trying to stop himself from screaming out the words, anguish shining in his eyes.

Stunned at the sudden change in his demeanour, Joyce stared, but only for a moment. She moved slowly towards him but stopped when

he stumbled back another step. "Sweet-", she began before he hissed, "Stop it! Stop calling me that! I'm not your kid! I'm not- dammit! Why do you even care? What are you trying to do?"

He was shaking, looking pained as he stared at her. "Steve. Its alright. Its okay. Can you tell me what's wrong?", she kept her voice soft and soothing, trying to calm him down.

He stared at her for a moment, before sinking down to his knees, wrapping his arms around himself and whispering, "Why are you doing this to me?"

Alarmed, Joyce started forward before stopping and saying, "Steve? I'm going to come over. Is that alright?" When she got no reply, she moved closer cautiously before dropping to her knees in front of him. Carefully, she reached for his shoulders and the boy flinched before tensing again.

"Steve?", she tried again and this time he looked up at her, his eyes dry but anguished. "I don't understand.", he whispered again, his voice cracking but eyes still miraculously dry. He began to shake violently again, slumping down to a sitting position.

"Why are you still here?", the boy asked after a few moments, his stance weary.

"I can't leave you now.", she said simply.

His lip trembled violently and a whine escaped him, his head lowering, eyes looking away from her face. Joyce couldn't help it then, she reached towards him slowly, trying not to startle him, taking his face gently in her hands and kissing his forehead. Another whimper escaped him and she wrapped her arms around him, tucking his head into her neck. He didn't hug back for a long time, before arms first returned the embrace with a weak hold, eventually tightening to the point of almost ripping the fabric of her sweater. He clung to her like a terrified, frightened child and then Joyce understood. He wanted the love, the hugs, the attention every child needed, but he was so, so afraid that it would disappear and hurt him again. Joyce tightened her hold on the teen as the boy shook apart in her arms. She could practically feel him breaking, right there on her

kitchen floor, wrapped securely in her arms. But through it all, he still didn't cry and again she had a dawning comprehension. The pain of 17 years was finally becoming clear just now to its victim. His heart was shattering and he couldn't stop it. She understood, this pain, this anguish, this absolute and total agony was beyond tears. Tears were simply not enough to provide a release for 17 years of locked up pain. And her heart broke for him, for the teen cracking and splintering in her arms, for the lost, sad little boy he had been, for his inability to shed tears. She held him closer, trying her best to hold him together as he broke. "Sweetheart, I'll never leave you." To her dismay, through it all, was the still uncontrollable trembling and the heart-breaking litany of words, "I don't understand. I don't understand."

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

Ahh, I am so sorry for the late, late post. I hit a major case of writer's block. On that note, I apologise for the short length of this chapter. I admit I'm a bit lost as to how I'm going to proceed. But I'll think of something. Sooner or later, but I promise I will complete this story. Thank you all for the wonderful comments and support! It means a lot to me! Please leave a review. This isn't my best chapter so do tell me where I could have done better.

It was only a few minutes before Steve gathered himself enough to gently push Joyce away and lean back against the wall. She let go of him but still sat close, observing him carefully without staring. He had largely stopped shaking but his hands still trembled slightly and he was now eerily quiet. His eyes, dry as before, moved to hers and he smiled then as if he was completely alright, but Joyce was not fooled. The smile didn't reach his eyes and she recognised what he was doing. He was carefully reconstructing the mask of nonchalance that made everyone in town believe that all was well with the Harrington couple and their bratty teenage son. But how far from a brat he was and till just a year ago no one in town knew that. Knowing what she was going to say next would probably be unwelcome, Joyce braced herself before speaking.

"Steve... hon, you need to stop doing that."

A genuinely confused expression was the response and Joyce realised that making people believe that he was fine was so ingrained in the boy's psyche that he didn't even realise that he was doing it. Something in her chest hurt when she thought of that and she had to pull herself away from the resulting sadness and anger in order to focus on the teen in front of her.

"Steve, listen to me. You don't have to pretend that everything's alright if it's not. You know that right?", she tried again, trying her best to show Steve how sincere she was being. The boy looked

surprised for a second before his expression fell slightly but he still valiantly tried to keep the weak, small smile on his face.

“It doesn’t work that way.”, he said softly, his voice taking an oddly comforting tone, “My world is different from yours, Ms. Byers. You’ve been so kind to me. And I can’t tell you-“

His voice wavered for less than a millisecond and most people wouldn’t even have noticed, before he continued on in a stronger but still comforting tone, “I can’t tell you how grateful I am for everything you guys have done for me. Its more than I thought possible. But you’ve done all you can. I’ll be fine now. Thank you.” He smiled at her after his little speech, and Joyce realised with a pang that he was trying to put her mind at ease, trying to reassure her even though he was suffering so much, and all alone.

He got up off the floor before she could say a word, reaching down with his hands to help her up and then started to walk out of the kitchen.

“Steve...”, she began, taking his hand, silently asking this troubled child to talk to her, but he merely squeezed her hand, let go and tried to move away again.

“Please-”, she tried once again. He didn’t even turn around this time, “I have a headache. I think I’ll go lie down.”

Seeing that she wouldn’t be able to get through him now, she let the matter drop, even though it pained her and nodded. “Okay. If you need anything...”

“Thank you, Ms. Byers. But I think you’ve done all you can for me.”

“That’s not-“

“There’s nothing okay?!” he growled before his expression immediately melted into one of regret and guilt. His voice was quieter, more polite, when he spoke the next time. “I’m sorry, Ms... Joyce. There’s nothing more you or anyone else can do for me. Just let it go.”

“But last night-“

“Last night... last night was a mistake I should never have made.”

“Steve...”

“Go to Will, Joyce. He needs you.”

Joyce blinked, and the next time she opened her eyes she was alone.

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

Honestly, I don't know what to say to you guys. It's been months since I last updated this story after I had a mean case of writer's block. I think I have simply fallen out of love with this story and I am so very sorry. I know from experience that it pains readers who like the story to hear that but it is the sad truth. While *Stranger Things* is still one of my favourite shows, I am not as inspired to write as I was when this story first began. And now that I've re-read the story, some parts do make me cringe. But I did make a promise to not abandon this story. So while I don't really feel it anymore, I will try my absolute best to complete this story as best as I can. Any further updates will be even more irregular, if that is even possible, (and I apologise from the bottom of my heart) but I will absolutely do my best to get this story done. You have all been so kind in your reviews and I am so grateful. Thank you. If not for you, this story would not have been possible. Please leave a review if you can.

This chapter is the shortest one yet and a bit more light-hearted than the ones before. Think of it as a filler while I get my bearings (Not that I have an excuse to ask for more time). I'm sorry if it isn't good enough and it feels like my heart isn't all in it. I will try to put up the next chapter sooner.

On a side note, please do not leave dirty comments here. The one who did that the last chapter knows who he/she is. I will not delete reviews with criticism but any vulgar, dirty ones have got to go.

Now that we've got that out of the way, on to the story!

Steve made his way back to Jonathan's room, sighing in relief when he saw that Hopper was still asleep. He had something to do and was

glad that Hopper wasn't awake to stop him. As quietly as possible, he began to look for his keys. He did vaguely remember slipping them into his pocket the previous night but they were no longer there. He must have dropped them somewhere. Scowling, the teenager hoped that he hadn't dropped them somewhere in the woods during his hair-brained little adventure.

"Looking for these?", a slightly amused but exasperated voice asked from behind him. Steve let out a yelp of surprise, one that he would deny to his grave, and spun around quickly. That was a bad idea, as his brain so helpfully reminded him by ordering his body to get dizzy and clutch at the nearest piece of furniture to keep his balance. He recovered quickly enough considering how awful he had felt the previous night, blinking and righting himself without help. But evidently, it wasn't quick enough for the owner of the voice, Hopper, who was now staring at him in concern.

Internally, Steve groaned. Oh, how he hated the looks of concern and pity he was being thrown continuously since last night. Speaking of last night, Steve really did groan in complete and utter embarrassment before dropping (carefully) into the chair next to the writing table. He felt his cheeks flush and wouldn't look up at the older man. Before Hopper could voice his concerns, the boy spoke.

"Chief Hopper? Please do me a favour and never tell me or anyone else what I did or said before. I'm pretty sure I was plenty out of it with that concussion."

"You remember what you said?", Hopper asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Not much really.", the boy said, his voice now muffled as he hid his flaming face in the desk, "But I'm pretty sure I'd die of embarrassment if I did."

For a few seconds, Hopper blinked stupidly, not expecting that reply at all. Then he let out a startled laugh and grinned, quite unable to stop himself. Oh the vanity of teenagers. He was glad though. At least Steve was acting fairly normal for a teenage boy. After everything that had happened to him, it was heartening to see that in some ways, he was still like every other boy his age.

“Don’t worry.”, he said, traces of the smile still playing on his lips, “Not many people know.”

“Oh, thank goodness.”, Steve breathed with such blatant relief that Hopper almost wanted to laugh again. However, remembering the events that had transpired just a few hours ago he quickly sobered. As if sensing his mood, Steve looked up from the table and eyed him warily.

“So,...”, Hopper drawled awkwardly, “How are you, uhh, feeling?”

“I’m alright.”, the boy said, just as awkwardly as he rubbed his neck stiffly.

Hopper didn’t believe him for a second but decided not to pursue the matter, moving on to the issue that started this strange interaction in the first place. “Why were you searching for your keys first thing in the morning?”

Steve threw him an impressive scowl and said defensively, “And what makes you think I was looking for them?”

Hopper shook his head in wonder. The boy he saw now was a complete 180 from the one he saw only a few hours ago. “Well, if you were looking for them, you can’t drive or stay alone yet, so no keys.” Seeing the protest coming, he quickly added, “Doctor’s orders.” The boy’s mouth snapped shut and he glowered at the carpet. Clearly, he wanted to get out of here but unfortunately, he was on concussion watch.

“Sorry kid.”, he said genuinely, “You gotta stay here for a while.”

An unhappy, annoyed look was all the reply he got.

Author’s Note:

Thank you for reading! I would love to hear from you so please, please leave a review! I will be updating just as soon as I can.